

Madhura Rasa: "Sweet Taste"



Rasa:

taste, essence, emotion, sap, appreciation, artistic delight, musical note, circulation, to feel lively, to dance

Balancing the Sweet Taste for Health & Wellbeing

Ayurvedic Cheat Sheet

Ayurveda: "The Science of Life", arising in India, and possibly the oldest form of medicine still practiced.

Dosha: a master force or pattern that tends to go out of balance. There are 3 doshas – *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*. We have each of them in our bodies, but are dominated by one or more. This is our *Prakruti*, our basic constitution.

Vata: Air and Space -cold, dry, rough, light.

Pitta: Fire and Water – hot, oily, liquid, light.

Kapha: Earth and Water – cold, heavy, oily, smooth.



The Nature of Sweet

What is this deep desire for sweet? What emotional and physical need does it serve?

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, food cravings reveal deeper emotional needs. The craving for sweet? Comfort of the mother.

Sweet is nourishment. It soothes, moistens, and builds. In the truest sense, it is life.

Full, or complex, sweets are foods that build the body - protein, whole grains, beans, fats. Empty or false sweets have processed and refined sugars - anything with white flour or sugar and even maple syrup. Without full, or complex, sweets we could not survive. All humans need a substantial amount of full sweet in their diet. All humans need to do away with most, if not all, of the empty sweets in their diet.

We are all born with a craving for sweet. From a western perspective, children have a natural preference for the sweet taste to help them avoid eating bitter poisonous

herbs. But I think this natural preference may be deeper. According to Ayurveda, babyhood and childhood are the *Kapha* time of life – juicy (water) and chubby (earth). *Kapha* leads to a propensity for phlegmy colds and flus, which has led many an adult to affectionately refer to children as germ bags. Growing and building the body is essential during this stage of life. This *Kapha* energy fosters a love of sweet in food and in experiences. Is there anything sweeter than a mother's love for her child? Is there anything sweeter than being enveloped in that complete nourishment, comfort, and love?



Sweet is so profound to us as babies that sugar water is an effective narcotic and is used in hospitals as a pain reliever. Breast milk is sweet. As babies we need this craving for sweet to keep us anxiously searching for a nipple and therefore surviving and thriving.

Farming has given me another perspective on sweet and its biological imperative. Sheep, chickens, and alpacas all have such a deep passion and frenzy for sweet that giving them feed is a little like being a dealer. Clearly they are addicted to feed. You can get them to do anything for it, but you might also be trampled to death.

If sheep had the same ability as humans to control their diet, they would abandon the pastures, gorge themselves on sweets, and die untimely deaths (just like modern Americans). There is a lot of scientific research to indicate that empty sweet, concentrated sweet, is drug-like in its action. But from a biological perspective I think there is more at play. In nature, the sweetest foods are in short supply. Finding a cache of sweetness (in the form of carbs, honey, or milk) is a time to load up and could mean the difference between life and death when times are lean or you are ill.

I think this is essential to recognize and honor.

In addition to American society fostering an addiction to sweet, it has also fostered a deep shame for being addicted. We are supposed to drink sugary sodas, white flour, and candy all day long but if that urge for sweetness draws us into overindulgence and excess weight, we are told that there is something wrong with us, something to fix. For those of us who know just how harmful sugar and white flour is, we might have an extra level of judgment for struggling with sweet.

But this grief and dissatisfaction over our inability to conquer sweet cravings fosters bitterness in us. If we have excessive bitterness in our life, sweet, which is the embodiment of physical and psychological satisfaction, is the natural antidote to all of these bitter feelings. Our cravings for sweet, comfort, and satisfaction increase and we are caught in a vicious cycle.

I want to honor those deep biological imperatives that are the true basis for this craving, especially given the anti-carb sentiment in today's health food movement (I had

a dear friend once tell me she could not eat beans because they are little carb bombs – poor beans, poor friend).

Given the ability to grow carb-alicious tubers and grains, humans went whole hog. Civilization, with all of its foibles and beauties, is based on agriculture and more specifically, the almighty carb. Somehow, traditional societies managed their sheep-like urges to gorge themselves and keel over from diabetes and heart disease. Scarcity certainly had something to do with it (only the rich could really indulge). But tradition and lifestyle also managed it. This is the secret to our ability to live comfortably with sweet and all that it means because in modern American society, even the poorest among us has access to an excess of empty sweet foods (in fact, the poorer you are the harder it is to access anything other than empty sweet).



How to Balance the Sweet Taste

Kapha and the sweet taste are both composed of the elements of earth and water. They have all of those qualities you would associate with earth and water, including a tendency to stagnate like a mucky pond. Relative to air and fire, earth and water (thought of to be a still pond or an ocean with no wind), are relatively immobile. This stuckness is a hallmark of people with a lot of *Kapha* in their constitution (*Prakruti*) or life (*Vikruti*). Sweet increases *Kapha*. Exercise, decreases *Kapha*. Movement (toiling in the fields, washing laundry by hand, walking and running as a means of transportation, etc.) counters *Kapha* and this craving for sweet. The more sedentary we are, the harder it will be to overcome the

siren call of the almighty carb. The more we gorge on sweet, the harder it is to move because it is increasing *Kapha*. Oh my, another vicious cycle!

Diet is equally important. Traditional cultures embraced a range of flavors. Experiencing the other tastes can help keep *Kapha* in check. Bitter might be the most important taste in this regard. While excessive bitterness creates the need for sweetness as an antidote, the right amount of bitter curbs a craving for sweet. Bitter is the taste that is most like *Vata*, the dosha that dominates at the end of life. In our elder years we dry up and lose mass, the opposite of our fat and juicy beginning on planet Earth.

Many herbalists will tell you that all you need to do to kick your sugar habit is to *eat something bitter every time you crave sweet*. This is well meaning, but it is the worse advice anyone can give a sugar addict. All of you sugar addicts out there know what I am talking about. I have yet to meet a real living person who could do this. But you know what you can do? Just increase bitter foods in your diet. This spring, I once again became obsessed with dandelions, seared in oil, salted and served with eggs and

bread (yum!). I included roots, leaves, and buds. A funny thing happened. After a week of this, I headed to town and had sudden access to sweet treats. I was hungry. Do you know what I chose for a snack? *Brussel sprouts!?!?* Honestly, all I craved was the bitter flavor of the roasted brussel sprouts. The sugary snacks were completely unappealing. Emotionally, this was an effortless shift. The bitterness of the dandelions had corrected my *Kapha* imbalance and my craving for sweet. Those herbalists were right! Bitterness cured my sugar addiction.

Pungent spices and culinary herbs help as well (they control *Kapha*, too, and have a positive effect on our emotions and nervous system). Inspired by Indian restaurants and a Mountain Rose Herbs bitter tincture recipe, I came up with a tasty, pungent, slightly bitter snack:

Carminative Crunch.

- 1 part anise seed
- 1 part roasted cacao nibs
- 1 part orange peel

Full sweet foods, true nourishment, and sweet herbs (which include adaptogens that can give us energy without depleting us) also help. Eat a whole foods diet. Incorporate adaptogens that are appropriate for you. Suggestions include:

Herbal Pills or Honey.

- 1 part ashwagandha powder
- 1 part chamomile powder
- ½ to 1 part cinnamon powder

Enough honey to create a dough, which you roll into small pills (I recommend chewing as this is tasty and it is a more effective way to take the remedy but if you want to swallow them whole, make sure they are small enough that they won't choke you – they do not go down smooth like a pharmaceutical pill).



Codonopsis and Coconut Flakes.

'Nuff said! 1 to 1 or any ratio you find tasty. You can add some roasted cacao nibs for yum factor.

In my own life, the yearning for maternal comfort is definitely the engine behind my craving. Finding other ways to self-comfort and sooth can help break the hold false sweet has on you - warm baths, heavy blankets, hugs, full sweet foods, good friends, kittens.

Ojas, Ama, & Rasayanas

Full or complex sweets foster ojas. Ojas is our essential juiciness or life energy. Kate Gilday says that ojas reflects the strength of our endocrine, nervous, and immune systems. Most books on Ayurveda refer to it as a subtle form of our immune system, but these three systems are so interconnected that they are now also referred to as the Neuro-Endo-Immune Supersystem.

Ojas is *Kapha* but in its more subtle form. Along with prana and tejas, it forms the mind.

Rasayanas (ayana means path and rasa is of course essence or juice/sap) are generally sweet and increase ojas. They are particularly good for *Vata* conditions. While there are herbs like ashwagandha and shatavari that are specific rasayanas, one could consume ghee, honey, and milk and eat sweet tastes and achieve the same effect.

In western herbalism, many, but not all, rasayanas could be characterized as adaptogens. Surprisingly, Merriam-Webster's Dictionary has a very accurate definition of adaptogen: *a nontoxic substance and especially a plant extract that is held to increase the body's ability to resist the damaging effects of stress and promote or restore normal physiological functioning.*

Adaptogen is a scientific term. When studied, these herbs are found to have an effect on the endocrine system.

In Ayurveda, life itself becomes medicine, which means that how you live and what you do and experience can increase a certain taste in your body and a certain *dosha*. To increase ojas, one would do things that increase sweet and *Kapha*. Candis Cantin sums it up beautifully in her "Integrative Herbology Correspondence Course": *Ojas is increased through a devotional life – helping others: family, friends, animals, and plants. In other words, being in service to Life increases ojas.*

Eating empty sweet foods or simple sugars like white flour and sugar, can increase ama in the body. One way of thinking about it is this: if you can properly digest and assimilate the food and experiences you ingest, you extract ojas, which nourishes your tissues. If you cannot properly digest your food, emotions, and experiences, then you create ama in the body. Ama is a toxic substance. It has not been properly transformed into ojas and nourishment for the body. It can accumulate and dampen your ability to digest food. Eventually this leads to disease. For most people, sugar and while flour dampens our ability to digest food and increases ama. Some people with particularly strong agni, or digestive fire/powers, may be able to fully assimilate these foods (at least for a while).

During a "Heart and Wisdom of Nature" weekend retreat at White Dove Sanctuary in Vermont, Kate Gilday said that if you drink Wise Water tea every day for three months, you can clear most of your ama. Right lifestyle and diet help, too! Remember, proper digestion is at the heart of increasing ojas and decreasing ama. This tea does just that.

Wise Water Tea

½ tsp cumin, ½ tsp coriander, ½ tsp fennel to 1 quart of water

Madhura Rasa Cheat Sheet



Most of the diet for all *doshas* should be full sweet foods.
Empty sweet is deranging to all *doshas*.

Elements	Qualities	Effect on Doshas
Earth + Water (just like <i>Kapha</i> & <i>Ojas</i>)	Very Wet Very Heavy Mildly Cooling	Increases <i>Kapha</i> Decreases <i>Pitta</i> and <i>Vata</i>

Full Sweet Foods	Empty Sweet Foods	Sweet Herbs
<p>Contain carbohydrates, proteins, and/or fats. This includes grains, meat, dairy, fish, eggs, beans, most vegetables, particularly root veggies.</p> <p>“Full sweet is the complex form of sweet and is less likely to aggravate <i>Kapha</i>, as it requires more assimilation and therefore does not have as strong or fast-acting effects as the pure form.”ⁱ</p>	<p>Contain processed sugar like candy, ice cream, and/or processed white flour. Also includes maple syrup and honey, which are healthier than pure cane sugar but are still very concentrated forms of sweet.</p> <p>Empty sweet, which is isolated or concentrated sugar, is the pure form of sweet.</p>	<p>“Herbs that contain sugars, starches, or mucilage. It includes bland, starchy, and pleasant tastes, & may be mixed with less agreeable secondary tastes. It is relatively uncommon. Typical sweet herbs include almonds, comfrey root, dates, fennel, flaxseed, licorice, maidenhair fern, marshmallow, psyllium, raisins, sesame seeds, slippery elm, & Solomon's seal. Sweet taste in herbs can be increased by processing herbs with various forms of raw sugar, honey, or cooking them in milk.”ⁱⁱⁱ</p>

Effects on the Body

builds and strengthens body tissue, soothes the mucous membranes, and allays burning sensationsⁱⁱⁱ

Increases: rasa (juiciness), water, ojas, strength; relieves thirst; nourishes & soothes; cools^{iv}

Demulcent; vulnerary; immunomodulating; blood & yin tonics; adaptogen^v

relieves hunger; brain tonic (the brain feeds on glucose)



Honey is a pure form of sweet. Normally this should be avoided with *Kapha*, however, some honey is appropriate for *Kapha* as it is considered light, dry, and heating, due to its other qualities. Honey is considered a good way to purify and reduce *Kapha*. In Ayurveda, honey is considered to be the ideal or perfected form of sweet and is called *Madhu*. It has already been digested by the bees and unlike other sweet foods, it does not need to be digested by our body to release its sweetness.

Effects on Emotions & Consciousness

Satisfaction/satiation (“the sweet taste of success”). Overindulgence: compacency/greed^{vi}

promote calmness, contentment and harmonization of the mind.^{vii}

Sweets intense complacent effect increases the naturally inert, complacent *Kapha*, cools the anger of *Pitta*, and comforts the fear of *Vata*.^{viii}

Overindulgence of *Madhura rasa*

Cold, damp, heavy so can lead to: lethargy; being overweight; heaviness; complacency; colds; catarrh; tendency toward constipation; lowers agni; can predispose to lymphatic congestion, diabetes, obesity, & fibrocystic breast disease. *Too many sweet foods increase the complacency of kapha, cool the anger of pitta and comfort the anxiety of vata.*^{ix}

Combined Tastes (from “The Yoga of Herbs: An Ayurvedic Guide to Herbal Medicine” by Dr. David Frawley & Dr. Vasant Lad)	Tastes of herbs are seldom single, though one usually predominates.
Sweet & Pungent	Sometimes combine, as with cinnamon, fennel, ginger, and onion. Such herbs are particularly good for <i>Vata</i> .
Sweet & Astringent	Often combine, as with comfrey, lotus, slippery elm, and white pond lily. Such herbs are particularly good for <i>Pitta</i> but may be hard to digest.
Sweet & Bitter	Sometimes combine, as with licorice. These herbs are also particularly good for <i>Pitta</i> .
Sweet & Sour	Combine in various fruit like hawthorn and oranges. They are very good for <i>Vata</i> .



Melissa Laurita Kohl runs the Fungi & Flora Folkschool in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, where she offers classes, private lessons and herbal consultations. Contact her at: (802) 357-2013; melissa@fungiflorafolkschool.com or fungiflorafolkschool.com.

Renowned herbalist and author, Rosemary Gladstar has this to say about Melissa: *“Melissa’s light shines so brightly and her enthusiasm and passion are infectious! I would sign up for her class.”*

- i "Pocket Guide to Ayurvedic Healing" by Candis Cantin Packard
- ii "The Yoga of Herbs: An Ayurvedic Guide to Herbal Medicine" by Dr. David Frawley & Dr. Vasant Lad
- iii "Pocket Guide to Ayurvedic Healing" by Candis Cantin Packard
- iv "The Way of Ayurvedic Herbs" by K.P. Khalsa & Michael Tierra
- v "Taste of Herbs" online course by Rosalee de la Foret
- vi "Prakriti: Your Ayurvedic Constitution" by Dr. Robert E. Svoboda
- vii "Pocket Guide to Ayurvedic Healing" by Candis Cantin Packard
- viii "Prakriti: Your Ayurvedic Constitution" by Dr. Robert E. Svoboda
- ix "The Ayurveda Bible: The Definitive Guide to Ayurvedic Healing" by Anne McIntyre